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ESSAY | William Safire

# Mr. Option Three

WASHINGTON  
**Y**our Secretary of State thinks that Mr. Gorbachev, at the recent summit meeting, used formulations of language that revealed an unexpectedly flexible attitude about the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan; in fact, some American negotiators were certain that the new language could be incorporated into the conference's joint statement, providing a small breakthrough.

But your Secretary of Defense disagrees: he thinks Mr. Gorbachev's departure from stilted diplomatic language was merely a manifestation of his informal style, and should not be taken as any change of Soviet position. And at the last moment in Geneva, the Soviet side balked at publicly using the Gorbachev formulation.

As President, you wonder: Should you cut back on covert aid, encouraging the supposed willingness of the Russians to pull out? Or should you toe the hard line, increasing aid to Afghan freedom fighters lest they be crushed by a Soviet winter offensive?

At such a moment, with department heads at loggerheads, you turn to your national security adviser for his judgment. What sort of opinion will you get? That depends on what sort of adviser you pick.

If you choose a national security adviser with a pronounced *Weltanschauung* — a Kissinger or Brzezinski — you will get the independent judgment of an opinionated authority. Such advice, by its nature, invites friction and demands decisions.

If you choose an adviser adept in the art of what the bureaucracy calls "Option Three" — the presentation of five options, ranging from abject surrender as Option One to nuclear war as Option Five — you will be led toward thin-gruel consensus, splitting the difference in the opinions of your departmental and intelligence advisers.

In choosing Adm. John Poindexter to succeed Col. Robert McFarlane, President Reagan has indicated that, at this stage, he wants a man who knows how to give him Option Three. As his national security adviser, he prefers a broker to a player.

This is an indication of Second Term Reagan. In most of his first term, when new directions required wrenching-around, national security advisers were factors: Richard Allen was a profound hard-liner, with a solid background in strategy, serving until Michel Deaver shot him down; William Clark was a shallow hard-liner, with no strategic experience, serving until he wore out; both counted in decision-making. But Colonel McFarlane, the tightly contained apparatchik operating between the doves of Defense

and the hawks of State, saw himself as a lubricator rather than a force. A born Number Two, he is succeeded by his own Number Two.

This is not to denigrate the mind of Admiral Poindexter. A man with a doctorate in nuclear physics can hardly be a dumb bunny; that education will be helpful in answering the Union of Terrified Technocrats on the feasibility of "Star Wars." Although the vice admiral is not known for published works on strategy, he is reputed to be one of the most skillful note-takers in the Reagan Administration.

We can expect his military title to atrophy quickly, as did that of Colonel McFarlane and General Scowcroft, his order-following predecessors, and we can be certain that a sudden Poindexter strategic brilliance will be discovered by news organizations newly dependent on him for background.

Why, then, the wistful look of might-have-been on the faces of hawks and old Reaganauts at the President's choice of Mr. Option Three in the shop whose very walls used to be held up by conceptual frameworks?

We miss the confrontational zest of the first term, when Mr. Reagan was more likely to make a controversial rather than a soothing choice. We yearn for the influx of strong thinkers to resist the onset of "Nancyism," the lust for an illusory quick-peace-fix to snatch a place in history.

These days, however, the qualities sought by the President are that an appointee be "up to speed," as deputies always are, or that the new face be familiar, and not a jarring new intellectual presence. "The President is comfortable with Poindexter," say White House aides eager to tuck the Reagan Presidency in. White House-broken.

A comfort Mr. (formerly Admiral) Poindexter will be, holding out Option Three on Afghanistan. But his appointment adds piquancy to the first "beauty contest" to be held in New Hampshire next week, when many of the Republican hopefuls gather to honor the editor William Loeb's memory. By an appointment so low-key as to be no-key, Mr. Reagan helps to shift the locus of ferment out of the White House and onto the hustings. □